



Searching for Bishop Su

Persecuted Chinese bishop gone but not forgotten

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(www.RemnantNewspaper.com, POSTED JULY 26, 2006) From the back seat of the gypsy cab, Ming-Chuan "Joseph" Kung watched Beijing blur by. Everything had been pre-arranged. Everything. As the hired driver steered through the streets of the capital city of the People's Republic of China, the seven passengers – a small delegation of Americans in town for a human rights conference – rode mostly in silence. Only periodic, superficial chitchat and the heavy breathing of the car's heater broke the stillness of that wintry January 8 in 1994.

Soon, the touristy section stacked with American-style hotels, designed for the comfort of Westerners spoiled by Capitalism, melted into the background. The well-lighted streets and sidewalks packed with people eating, drinking, laughing that Saturday evening gave way to another reality.

Within a span of only a few minutes, a few miles, the cabbie maneuvered through the outer sections of the ancient city that very few foreigners ever get to see – the native

Chinese area ravaged by fanatics fueled with Communist revolutionary ideology. The scenery turned bleak. The streets turned dark. Very few lights. Even fewer people.

In front of a dilapidated apartment building the car rolled to a stop. Even if the mercury hadn't stalled below freezing, fear mixed with a foreboding dread would have chilled the visitors. From the safety of the cab, Kung took a quick look around, over his shoulder and into the shadows. Necessary to look for any sign of a spy – anyone who could possibly report (for a reward, of course) to officials the appearance of the foreign visitors.

This is not a joke. This is Communism.

Onto the sidewalk, Kung with the Americans stepped and entered the building. The cabbie remained with his coach. With only the dimmest light leaking from unknown sources, the group fumbled forward and found the main staircase. The building had no elevator. Up they climbed, ascending the dark six, seven or eight flights, stepping over the debris, mostly food, that littered the hallways and landings. What looked like Chinese cabbage – half rotten, half dried, splayed on bare floors – emanated a distinct, pungent odor. Without refrigeration, the residents needed to resort to archaic preservation through drying.

Finally, the foreigners found the right apartment and knocked.

A woman opened the door and welcomed them inside the main room, no bigger than a walk-in closet. The name of the woman was neither offered nor asked. In Communist China, information is a dangerous possession. Ignorance is encouraged, even among family members – just in case one is picked up by police and interrogated, for whatever reason. For security's sake, it's definitely better and safer not to know. Remember, this is Communism.

Cramped to begin with, the room had few inches to spare with an impromptu table-turned-altar taking up most of the space. Some of the guests sat. Others stood. Among them were U.S. Rep. Christopher Smith (R-NJ) and Kung, founder of the Cardinal Kung Foundation in honor of his uncle, the late Cardinal Pin-Mei "Ignatius" Kung, Bishop of Shanghai, who suffered persecution in prison for the Faith for 30 years.

All waited for another invited guest: Bishop Zhi-Ming "Jacobus" Su. Minutes passed. Uncomfortable silence settled on the crowd. Finally, another knock.

The woman opened the door and let in Su, Bishop of Baoding, who greeted each of the Americans with a handshake and a humble smile. That night back in 1994 was to be a special night. Special, indeed. It was the first time a bishop from the underground

Roman Catholic Church in China would not only meet face to face with a member of the United States Congress, but he would also celebrate the holy Mass for the high-ranking government official, a Roman Catholic.

However, there was one tiny problem. In Communist China, this secret meeting between the bishop and the Americans was (and still would be today) highly illegal – considered nothing less than a threat to the unity of Chinese society.

Officially, China is an atheist country and permits no religious practice outside government-approved organizations, such as the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Notice the nomenclature: the Chinese, not Roman, Catholic Patriotic Association.

Even though the association's Communist-approved and Communist-regulated churches may look Catholic, even though the priests may wear Roman collars, even though a portrait of the Pope may hang on the walls and even though the Mass may have the same rites and rubrics, this pseudo-religious club is not Roman Catholic. This is a non-Catholic catholicism, a la Communist style – with allegiance to the government, not the Vicar of Christ.

Su and the other Catholics filling the ranks of the Church Militant in the underground Roman Catholic Church in China are those faithful who will not deny the authority of the Pope by registering with the Patriotic Association, despite the constant threat of detainment, arrest, imprisonment, forced labor, torture, even death.

Indeed, the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, specifically Article 36, guarantees "freedom of religious belief," but this does not mean freedom of religion. Anyone and everyone who wants to practice their Catholic faith must register with the Patriotic Association that oversees, regulates and approves or denies all goings-on in the government-sanctioned churches, for "religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination."

Freedom of religion in China? No such thing.

Religious and personal freedom for the people of China began to disintegrate back in 1949 (after the end of the three-year Chinese Nationalist-Communist Civil War that followed in the wake of World War II), when the Communists defeated the Kuomintang – the Chinese Nationalist Party that fled to and settled in Taiwan.

Disdainful of anything that smacks of the democratic West, xenophobic Communists – the single-party power – have not and will not accept any outside influence, which most definitely includes the Vatican. Communists condemn and declare those faithful

to the Bishop of Rome as counter-revolutionaries, political enemies who form a subversive organization, an illegal society using the cloak of religion to cover their treasonous deeds.

Being patriotic in China means being a revolutionary, which means being anti-imperialist and anti-papal, therefore anti-Roman Catholic. Roman Catholics are believed to be pro-imperialist and pro-papal; therefore, those who profess belief in the one, holy, catholic, apostolic Church receive the politically incorrect "hat" of unpatriotic counter-revolutionary.

Try as they did, Communists found it difficult to destroy the Church from within. So they attempted to destroy it from without by establishing a government-controlled church to replace the Roman Catholic Church. As early as 1949, in an attempt to break with the Holy See, the People's Republic of China established the Three-Self Reform Movement, so-called for its aim to be Self-governing, Self-supporting and Self-propagating.

Relations between the Vatican and China officially broke in 1951 after the Communists kicked out apostolic nuncio Archbishop Antonio Riberi. For the next couple years, they rounded up and expelled all foreign clergy and religious. Next, they began arresting and imprisoning Chinese priests and religious. Then the laity.

In 1957, the Three-Self Reform Movement was replaced by and integrated into the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, officially founded on July 15 of that year. During the subsequent Cultural Revolution (1966-76), all religious activities were banned and labeled as evil cults.

Since then, priests and bishops who refuse to register with the Patriotic Association but who offer Mass and the sacraments are said to be setting up illegal organizations and conducting illegal, counter-revolutionary activities, thus in violation of the nation's Constitution, specifically Article 28, which decrees: "The state maintains public order and suppresses treasonable and other counter-revolutionary activities; it penalizes actions that endanger public security and disrupt the socialist economy and other criminal activities, and punishes and reforms criminals."

For this reason, underground bishops, priests, nuns and laity who remain true to the Pope are often singled out and persecuted. For conducting counter-revolutionary activities, it is not unusual for non-registered Catholics to receive three-year sentences (for starters) in reform-through-labor camps, which have been compared to the legendary gulags of the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and the concentration camps favored by World War II Nazis.

Yet, despite the *longa manus*, the long-reaching hand of the Communists, the Church has not only continued to survive, it flourishes. In 1949, the Catholic Church had around 3 million faithful. Now, the estimate is about 10 million.

Bishop Su remained one of the faithful ones. For this reason, in 1994, by the time he was 60 years old, he had already spent almost 25 years in prisons and labor camps. He was arrested no fewer than five times. And despite the ever-present threat and danger that night in Beijing, he met with the Americans. A calm joy mixed with excitement settled over all those sitting in the small apartment. Two more guests were expected. Two of the approximate 50 underground bishops in China were thought to be on their way. The plan for the evening: To celebrate the Mass for the foreign guests.

Everyone sat and waited.

Minutes ticked by. No knock at the door. The two bishops still did not arrive. As time passed, an uneasiness that had settled in Kung's heart since arriving in front of the apartment building began to make him believe that something was not right. Increasingly nervous, after about 15 minutes, he asked Su to start and not to wait for the others.

The decision was made.

Kung struck a match and lit the two Mass candles on the altar. The soft tones of Su's voice lifted the prayers heavenward. Kung, who was born in China but immigrated to the United States in 1955, translated for the others. That small group of faithful prayed that night, kneeling on the bare concrete floor, not only for the persecuted, but also for the persecutors.

During the Mass, the following Bible passage, Isaias 42:6-7, was read: "I have given thee for a covenant of the people, for a light of the Gentiles: that thou mightest open the eyes of the blind, and bring forth the prisoner out of prison, and them that sit in the darkness out of the prison house."

As the Mass ended and the evening wound down, everyone dug deep into their pockets for donations to give to Su. Plans were gently confirmed for the following day for Sunday Mass.

The other two bishops never arrived that night. It was not a total surprise when Kung heard much later that while on their way to the apartment, public security police for the Communist Party picked them up, detained them, interrogated them and released them later. This is a frequent, and not unexpected, occurrence for members of the underground Church in China.

On Sunday, mid-morning just after breakfast, the same gypsy cab driver – a trusted member of the underground Church – picked up Kung and two other Americans in front of their Beijing luxury lodgings – Shangri-La's China World Hotel.

As the car rolled through China's bleak countryside, the driver steered ahead for about a ninety-minute ride outside of Beijing and into the Baoding village, where they picked up Su. The bishop directed the driver. Ahead. Pull up ahead. The car moved forward.

Stationed at stealth positions, women and men of the underground church stood and watched and permitted the car to continue. The sentinels kept alert to the approach of Communists on the prowl for actions subversive to the Party. Unimpeded, the cab putt-putted toward the parking area, where the driver found a spot somewhere in the midst of the hundreds of bicycles, a popular mode of transportation. The Mass, offered by an elderly priest of the underground, had already begun.

Since it was in the dead of winter, there was neither a leaf on a tree nor a blade of grass on the ground. Kung, dressed only in a light overcoat, felt the sting of the wind. Nonetheless, he found a vacant piece of frozen earth and knelt beside the others. He looked around. Thousands of miles from his home in Connecticut, there he was kneeling with 450 underground Roman Catholics at an illegal gathering, in China.

Overwhelmed, he marveled at the outdoor Mass celebrated in a barnyard, transformed into a holy sanctuary. How appropriate. It was the Feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of the day the Magi arrived in Bethlehem to adore the newborn.

To the left, he noticed a donkey stable, which doubled that day as the sacristy, where the priest changed into and out of his vestments. To the right, a brick fire pit used to burn the village trash, with charred remains scattered in the heap: lanky sticks of discarded bamboo, singed wires, blackened metal poking through the ashes.

The altar, a wooden table, stood in the center, with a white canopy draped over and above to protect the sacrifice to be offered. A small crucifix – retrieved from its hiding place – was tacked to the wall. Also retrieved from its special secret place, the chalice shone in the morning light that penetrated the haze.

For communion, altar boys unrolled a bolt of long, white cloth over a makeshift rail. There, parishioners knelt to receive on their tongues, old-Church style, the smuggled hosts, made by underground nuns.

After the Mass, Su invited Kung for lunch at his home, a traditional one-story dried-mud structure, with a dried-mud floor, a half-broken door and a small, inadequate coal stove. But it was neat, tidy and welcoming. On a table between two chairs were two

bowls filled with fruit. One with oranges. One with red and green freckled apples. The kitchen, so rudimentary, it only had a hole in the roof through which smoke from the coal-burning stove could escape. Su and Kung sought privacy in a small side room where they talked about confidential Church matters. Before leaving, Kung knelt before the bishop and received a blessing.

In the afternoon, the two men walked out of the house, into the yard and toward the car. The driver, who had waited outside, started the motor and Kung took his seat. Su remained in the yard. As the car drove off, Kung looked back. The bishop continued to stand, waving goodbye.

This is Kung's last memory of Su.

Then it was time for Kung to return to the United States, but not before he received a more-than-firm handshake and a farewell warning from one of the highest-ranking Communist officials in the Religious Affairs Bureau, none other than Liu "Anthony" Bainian, the vice-chairman of the Patriotic Association. Bainian's nickname? "China's Pope."

"You are here with an official delegation, so we give you face. But next time, if you come here again, alone by yourself, we will not stand on ceremony with you," Bainian said in Chinese.

Kung understood. The Communists found out that the Americans had met with members of the underground Church. The Communists always find out everything.

Shortly after Kung arrived home, he received an urgent call from Baoding. Su had been arrested.

On January 20, eleven days after Kung, the Congressman and the others departed from China, Hebei Province police officers stormed into Su's village home, picked him up and held him for interrogation.

Su's whereabouts – unknown.

Frantic, Kung immediately telephoned Smith. Su needed help. Outraged, Smith notified colleagues in Congress. A letter-writing campaign to officials in the Chinese embassy soon began, vociferously defending the religious freedom of Su and demanding his release. After being detained for nine days, the bishop – who still refused to register with the Patriotic Association – was released on January 29.

For Su, life was relatively calm, for a while.

Two years later, the bishop had some unexpected guests drop in at his home. In February 1996, members of the security bureau "visited" Su and forced him into house arrest. This means that he was not free to come and go as he pleased, and he was definitely not allowed to meet with his parishioners or offer Mass or any of the sacraments.

Also under strict surveillance was his auxiliary bishop the Rev. Shuxin An, who, like Su, was watched at all times by security officers.

In April 1996, Su escaped, with the help of a few of the faithful in the underground Church. During this period of "freedom" he penned a letter to the Standing Committee of the People's National Congress. "Thoroughly investigate the serious unlawful encroachment on the citizen's rights," he wrote. "Administer corrective measures to restore order and control to ensure that the civil rights and interests of the vast number of religious believers are protected."

They investigated, all right – Su.

They administered corrective measures, all right – to Su. On October 8, 1997, authorities with the Public Security Bureau hunted down the bishop, found out that he had been hiding in the city of Xinji, in Hebei Province, approximately 280 kilometers south of Beijing. They wasted no time and arrested him.

That was the last time he was seen publicly. Yet, people still petition for information of the whereabouts of Su, who, if still alive, would be 73 years old this year. But in China, it's not so easy to voice concerns. It's easier for those outside the Communist death grip.

In Italy, the Rev. Bernardo Cervellera, a 54-year-old priest with the Rome-based Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (Pontificium Institutum pro Missionibus Exteris), does all he can do to keep in the news the plight of the persecuted Chinese of the underground Church.

In March 1999, Cervellera, a newsman and then-editor of International Fides News Service, wrote an editorial asking that China's president release Su and An or at least reveal where the two men were being held and under what charges.

In reaction to Cervellera's plea, the Vatican issued its statement through Joaquin Navarro Valls, the 69-year-old Spaniard who recently (and finally) handed in his resignation as director of the Vatican press office, a post he's held since 1984.

Valls, reportedly a devoted member of the controversial "secret" organization, Opus Dei, since the early 1970s, couldn't do enough to distance the Holy See from Cervellera.

He reportedly released this public statement found on the Internet. "The Secretariat of State up until now has taken no step concerning the liberation of the two bishops of Baoding. The circulation of such news was a personal initiative of Fr. Bernardo Cervellera, not agreed on by authorities at the Secretariat of State... Therefore, the ideas raised in the International Fides Service are Fr. Cervellera's personal opinions for which he assumes full responsibility."

Undaunted, Cervellera continued with his mission to help those persecuted in China. In February 2002, he published on the Fides Web site a list of missing bishops and priests. Incredibly, rather than backing Cervellera, the Vatican disciplined the missionary, this time with a pink slip. In April 2002, he reportedly was forced to clean out his desk, shown the door and told never to return to that newsroom. Ever.

But Cervellera never gave up. In November 2003 he joined the staff of Asia News, a monthly magazine that began publishing in 1986. Now, he's the editor of AsiaNews.it, the tri-lingual (Chinese, English, and Italian) Web site version he created of the magazine. AsiaNews.it, a European-based pipeline of information from the East to the West, is a must-read that has documented the abuses inflicted by the Communists upon the underground Catholics.

The same month that Cervellera joined Asia News, there was an update on Su. According to a posting on Kung's Web site, www.cardinalkungfoundation.org, he had possibly been spotted around November 15, 2003. "Bishop Su was taken to the Officers' Ward of the Baoding Central Hospital in Baoding, Hebei, for an eye operation and for heart ailments. He was heavily guarded by approximately twenty plainclothes government security personnel, including Mr. Jia Ruiqi, who is a high-ranking officer of the public security bureau of Baoding. It was reported that the name of Su is not officially registered in the hospital record."

However, that was 2003. This is 2006, and Su's whereabouts – unknown. Still. But Kung, 73, the same age as Su, has not given up. Neither has Cervellera. Nor Smith. Smith would like to return to China before the year is over. He wants to find Su, who during their meeting gave the politician a rosary, which the Congressman still uses to pray. "The government claims that he's missing or can't be found. That is so not believable. They know exactly where he is, and we believe, we can't say absolutely, that they have him," Smith said over the telephone from his D.C. office.

Smith, a 53-year-old member of the House of Representatives, has done plenty for human rights. He was a chairman on the House Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights when the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, authored by Rep. Frank Wolf (R-VA), was introduced and passed.

The subsequent International Religious Freedom Report 2005, released Nov. 8, 2005 by the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, stated that reports have suggested that Su "had been held in a form of 'house arrest.' The government continued to deny having taken 'any coercive measures' against him and stated he was 'traveling as a missionary.'"

Still, the search for Su continues.

Meanwhile, even though there's been much political jibber-jabbering back and forth between China and the Vatican regarding the question of "diplomatic relations," it seems as if the question of human rights has been lost in this pointless posturing.

Why isn't the Vatican doing more to locate the bishop?

Last fall, Roger Mahony, the 70-year-old Cardinal of the Los Angeles Archdiocese, traveled to China, visiting various churches registered with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. He posed with various "priests" for snapshots as souvenirs of those joyful days. He even wrote two travel essays published in a couple November issues of the archdiocesan weekly tabloid, *The Tidings*.

Mahony wrote that he met bishops of the Patriotic Association, but he never mentioned meeting any underground bishop. Could that possibly be true? I had to find out.

Someone tipped me off that after the Sunday 10 a.m. Mass, Mahony meets and greets parishioners in the patio area outside the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, located in downtown Los Angeles. I found a spot and lingered.

Mahony exited the cathedral from a side exit and headed joyfully toward those of us standing beneath a potted tree, obviously waiting for him. "I read about your trip to China," I said as I walked toward him, smiling. "Did you meet with any of the underground bishops? Did you request the whereabouts of Bishop Su of Baoding, who's been missing since 1997?"

"No. I was there for a very special purpose. It wasn't to stir up trouble. They wouldn't have let me in." He chuckled.

In what appeared to be an attempt to shake me off, he walked toward a parishioner holding two life-sized photos of the Cardinal to be autographed. Taking a Sharpie pen from the man, Mahony asked, "Where should I sign?"

I persisted.

"So, you weren't able to find out any information, or even ask?"

"It was an opportunity to meet with the emerging leadership of the church, the young priests. They don't know anything about it."

The Cardinal maneuvered around a group of gawkers in an effort to avoid more questions.

But still, one remains unanswered.

Where is Bishop Su?